

SEGGSMA N JOHN

DRAWER 21a

STATUES

7-2001 085-02855



Statues of Abraham Lincoln

John Segesman

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

A very faint, light gray watermark-like image of the Indiana Statehouse in Indianapolis is visible in the background. The building is a neoclassical structure with a prominent portico of Corinthian columns and a multi-tiered roofline. The words "Indiana Statehouse" are faintly visible above the main entrance.

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Pittsburgh

MAGAZINE

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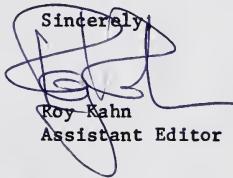
Ruth Cook
Lincoln National Life Foundation
1300 South Clinton Street
Fort Wayne, IN 46801

Dear Ms. Cook:

Thanks so very much for your kind assistance regarding my research into the Lincoln statues attributed to Alphonso Pelzer. I hope you find the article, "The Truth About Honest Abe," interesting.

For your records, I am also enclosing a copy of the letter furnished to me by Wooster College in which John Segesman lays out his case.

Again, thanks for your help.

Sincerely,

Roy Kahn
Assistant Editor



Real PITTSBURGH

The Truth About Honest Abe

by Roy Kahn

Early in 1916, the school children of Wilkinsburg, spurred on by an enthusiastic street commissioner named William C. Ewing, bought a statue of Abraham Lincoln. It was erected on June 9 at the intersection of the William Penn and Lincoln highways, and commemorated the elimination of street level railroad crossings from Wilkinsburg.

One year before, the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic in Boise, Idaho, bought a similar statue for the local Old Soldiers Home. In Fremont, Nebraska, in Detroit, in Wooster, Ohio, the scene was played and replayed, so that by 1921, six Lincolns had been added to the national landscape. Each one was exactly the same—Model No. 6910, a life-size rendition of The Great Emancipator in bronze, bronze-look copper, or zinc from the W.H. Mullins Company catalog of fine metal art, Salem, Ohio.

In their own small way the statues are famous. Three stand lonely guard along the Lincoln Highway, America's first transcontinental roadway. Two were gifts to automakers Henry B. Joy, president of Packard Motor Car Company, and Henry Leland of Cadillac Motor Car Company. One was a gift to Wooster College. Each was said to be the work of German-born sculptor Alphonse Pelzer. That makes them noteworthy, says the Lincoln National Life Foundation in Fort Wayne, Indiana, which keeps track of things like Lincoln statues. For with six of his Lincolns scattered about the country, plus a seventh in Lin-



coln (now part of Middlesex), New Jersey, Pelzer holds the world record for Lincoln statues on display.

Only the record doesn't belong to Pelzer. Despite what the art books and history books say, Pelzer made only one Lincoln statue, the one in New Jersey. The rest are the work of another man, an obscure Wooster, Ohio, sculptor named John G. Segesman.

Why Segesman was forgotten by history is a mystery whose answer seems to have disappeared along with most of the documents from the

Mullins Company. It may have been because Pelzer did the first statue, and as a result, it was assumed that he did all of them. Perhaps Pelzers were easier to sell than Segesmans.

What is known for sure is that, in 1897, Pelzer was staff sculptor for the Mullins Company. That year, he made a mold and hammered out a statue of Lincoln, employing a technique similar to the one used on the Statue of Liberty. The work was sold to Silas Dewy Drake, president of the New Jersey Mutual Realty Company, who used it to commemorate the opening of Lin-

coln, New Jersey, a town he built and then served as its first mayor. Lincoln's Lincoln, the bronze-look cooper model, stood seven feet tall on 13-inch feet.

That should have been the end of the Pelzer saga, for there is no evidence that the mold was used again. Pelzer dropped out of the picture in 1902 when he left Salem and returned to Germany. Two years later, he died. After that, the Mullins Company didn't have much use for No. 6910. By the early 1900s, the Victorian architecture craze was on the decline, and the ornamental metalwork business was in a slump. People weren't buying metal Lincolns, or much of anything else.

Ever the businessman, Mullins turned his entrepreneurial attentions to other markets. According to records, he managed to sell the Mexican government 350 copper busts of president and national hero Benito Juarez, and then went on to sell the Guatemalans an equestrian statue of a president named Barrios. Available sources leave unclear which Barrios Mullins immortalized. It could have been Justo Rufino Barrios, who died leading an invasion of El Salvador, or his nephew, Jose Maria Reina Barrios, who was assassinated while in office.

Then in 1913 there was a ripple in the decorative metal market. Miami Beach developer Carl G. Fisher, Henry Joy, and a collection of magnates from the budding auto industry announced a plan to help popularize the automobile. They decided to pioneer a roadway from New York to San Francisco. It was called the Lincoln Highway and their group, the Lincoln Highway Association, spent millions of dollars building and promoting it. Mullins, it ap-

REAL PITTSBURGH

pears, saw the heightening Lincoln fever as an opportunity. He instructed John Segesman, who had replaced Pelzer as company sculptor, to make a new Lincoln mold. When it was finished, the new version bore a striking resemblance to the old one. Both versions had Lincoln's left hand grasping a scroll with "Proclamation of Emancipation" written across it. Both Lincolns wore vests with six buttons. Both wore overcoats with two buttons on the back. But in other details the statues were different. Pelzer's Lincoln was seven feet tall; Segesman's was a life-size 6 feet 4 inches. Pelzer's was rich in detail, from the wrinkles in the "Emancipation" scroll to creases in the trousers. Segesman's was comparatively plain.

What scant evidence remains from the ensuing sculpture promotion suggests that the Mullins Company told

the world that the Segesman was actually the Pelzer. In an October 2, 1929, letter to Louis A. Warren, founder of the Lincoln Library in Fort Wayne, Samuel J. Watkins, writing for Mullins Manufacturing, reported that the Wilkinsburg Lincoln was a "bronze statue... made by the old W.H. Mullins Company of Salem, Ohio. The sculptor (sic) was Alfonso Pelzer.... The statue as we recall was 6'4", which was approximately the same height as Lincoln."

The statue wasn't bronze and it wasn't by Pelzer, but no one seemed to notice. So the myth continued uncontested, except for a plaintive cry from Segesman on March 25, 1948. On that day, in the Wooster (Ohio) Daily Record, he took issue with an article by F. Lauriston Bullard on the Pelzer family of Lincolns. Six of the seven "Pelzer" statues were his, Segesman wrote the editor.

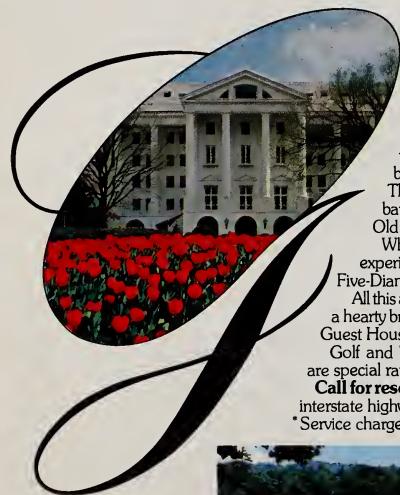
And after describing how he replaced Pelzer in 1899, the sculptor explained, "In 1915 I got orders to make a life-size model of Abraham Lincoln. I copied the face from a plaster mask that was sent from Washington, D.C. There was no beard, the eyes blank spots. These 'missing parts' I copied from an oil painting." Pelzer's statue, he added, was done from "photos and other pictures."

A copy of Segesman's letter made its way into the files of Wooster College, but the world of art history did not hear of correction. It had long ago forgotten Segesman.

In Wilkinsburg, not only the artist but the statue itself faded into obscurity. For years it stood neglected at the highway junction, remembered only by a few borough diehards. Then, on May 30, 1981, it was again catapulted into spotlight when thieves ripped Lincoln's body

from his feet and carried him away. Borough residents organized a reward fund for Lincoln's return. They even contemplated having a copy made of what they thought was the original, the Pelzer in New Jersey. Had they followed that option, someone would probably have noticed that the two statues were different. But no copy was ever made. The following March, the statue was recovered from a shallow grave under a tractor frame, where it had been stashed for about nine months. Its legs were crushed, its face disfigured, its right hand severed.

It cost the community \$10,000, but the statue was repaired and stands again, which is more than Wooster College can say. The college's Lincoln was stolen too, ripped from its feet just like Wilkinsburg's. But the Wooster Lincoln is in a store-room now, lying on its back.



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